Communalism and Intercultural Communication: impacts on national governance in Malaysia.

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Abstract

This paper tries to understand the application of communalism as a key concept, developed by Andrew A.Moemeka[1] in the context of Intercultural communication in Malaysia. It discussed mainly one important aspects of intercultural communication and ffects toward policy development and good governance: the conceptual framework on which communalism is the domain concept compared to the conventional "collectivisme-individualisme". By analyzing the multi-cultural and polarity of Malaysian, this paper discusses Moemeka'a argument on communalism and the process of communication. It argues that the communalistic values and principles although still dominant in Malaysian community, but was challenged by modernization of communication process occurred in the representative democratic political system. People see government as distinct from society or community. Consequently, society developed a dual interaction or communication pattern that is creative coordination for the government or 'the collective arena' and standardized coordination for the community or 'the communalistic arena'. Finally, these affect the national governance as a whole. Government should realize and plan a strategy to develop more effective and participative governance.

Introduction

Taking Condon and Yousef (1975), who stress that "we cannot separate culture from communication, for as soon as we start to talk about one we are almost inevitably talking about the other, too" (p.34). Intercultural communication deals with the effects of culture on communication (Hart II 1996). Many definitions of culture exist in the literature of intercultural communication. Gudykunst & Kim (1984) equate culture with a theory "for interpreting the world and knowing how to behave". Culture is a technical term used by anthropologists to refer to a system for creating, sending, storing, and processing information developed by human beings, which differentiates them from other life forms" (Hall 1990, p.183).

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[1] Moemeka, A.A. (1998). *Communalism as a fundamental dimension of culture.* Journal of Communication, 48(4), 118-139 (Intercultural Communication KOM 5215-Week 2-5)

It consists of ideals, values, and assumptions about life that are widely shared among people and that guide specific behaviors. To Samovar and Porter (1972) culture "manifests itself both in patterns of language and thought and in forms of activity and behavior. These patterns become models for common adaptive acts and styles of expressive behavior which enable people to live in a society within a given geographical environment at a given state of technical development (p.3). Intercultural communication is communication between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event. Cross-cultural communication is also used frequently referring to communication between people from different cultures (Samovar 1995).

Based on the definitions, we found the conceptualization of culture as problematic; in a sense it is difficult to determine when communication is intracultural and when it is intercultural. Such definition is indeed difficult to capture the experience of intercultural communication in Malaysia and to classify it either 'intercultural' or 'intracultural'. However, those definitions regarding intercultural communication discussed about shared background characteristics of cultures such as histories, institution, core values, beliefs and attitudes or worldviews, heritage and traditions, technologies, as well as shared behavioral characteristics (Samovar, 1995; Dodd, 1987; Porter and Jain 1981; Sarbaugh, 1979).

Therefore, this essay regards the process of intercultural communication that is happening in Malaysia, fulfilled those background characteristics, but is distinguished by two main factors: 1. The reality of pluralism, multi-ethnicity and multicultural background of its population; 2. The identity of each ethnic group as distinct to each other, with different values, norms and belief. Cynthia Enloe (1973) has characterized Malaysian society as *Nationality ethnicity*, which means the identity of its ethnic composed of various ethnicities, which can be found abroad, such as Chinese, Indian and Eurasian.

This essays is an attempt to discuss the issue of intercultural communication in Malaysia by examining and analyzing the impact of the concept of communalism as discussed by Moemeka (1998) as a distinct characteristic of Intercultural Communication in Malaysia.

Literature Reviews

As research and study of intercultural communication in Malaysia is concerned, there were less literatures and past studies focusing on the question of communalism and intercultural communication. However, we may take a broad genealogy of Intercultural Communication to understand the issue and to locate it in the context of this essay.

Intercultural communication as a discipline was established perhaps by the creation of the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) in 1950s and the role-played there by anthropologist Edward T. Hall. Indeed, this era is often marked as the "beginning" of the field of intercultural communication (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990). Hall and his colleagues abandon an anthropological view of "culture" and to treat "culture" in a pragmatic, goal-oriented manner. According to Leeds-Hurwitz (1990), this decision set the agenda for intercultural communication as a field of inquiry. Most scholars in intercultural communication conceptualize "culture" in terms of race, social class, and gender identity. For instance, Daniel (1970) argues that communication between the poor and the affluent should be viewed as a case of cross-cultural communication. Whiting(1971) and Whiting

and Hitt (1972) examine code-restrictedness and problem-solving communication among lower and middle class black and white teenagers. Philipsen (1975, 1976) examines how talk is used by working class white men. While many of the studies cited above compare two or more cultures, a number of other studies are concerned with the explication of one culture[i].

Also of note are the varieties of methods employed in studying intercultural communication. Philipsen(1975, 1976) utilizes ethnographic methods, Rich (1971) employs case studies, Whiting and Hitt(1972) use a quasi-experimental design, and Dubner (1972) conducts a textual analysis of film, previous research, and popular literature. The researcher is also involved with social debates of the 1970s such as Whiting and Hitt (1972), and Philipsen (1975, 1976) attempt to highlight how social class differences negatively affect communication. Indeed, a 1977 special issue of Journal of Communication entitled "When Cultures Clash" is devoted to the analysis of the effects of new technologies, products, and systems of communication on traditional cultures (e.g., Katz, 1977; Lomax, 1977). In addition, a number of articles address the effects of the "New World Information Order" on developing countries (e.g., Grossberg, 1979; Nordenstrong, 1979; Righter, 1979).

In 1970s, up until about 1977, "culture" is conceptualized in a variety of ways (i.e., race, social class, gender, and nation), diverse analytical methods are utilized, and there is deep interest in how intersections between various nodes of cultural identity both play out in, and are constructed by, communication. Starting about 1978, "culture" comes to be conceived almost entirely in terms of "nation-state" and by 1980; "culture" is predominantly configured as a variable in positivist research projects.

By 1983, the intercultural communication literature begins to be dominated by Gudykunst and associates. Gudykunst and Nishida (1989) outline their "objectivist" approach to the study of intercultural communication which strikingly corresponds to the discursive rules for intercultural communication scholarship as laid out by Leeds-Hurwitz(1990).

Most immediately, critical/feminist scholars appeared with new conceptualizations of "culture". They are not interested in the idea of "culture" per se, but use operationalized notions of cultural variation (e.g., individualism/collectivism) as one among many independent variables that affect the dependent variable[ii] "Culture," at this level, is most often defined as nationality, and the constructedness of this position and its intersection with other positions such as gender and social class is not considered. This approach also concerns with identity as part of culture. For instance, feminist scholars such as Marsha Houston (1992), Patricia Hill Collins (1993), and bell hooks (1989) argue that inquiry must address interlocking and overlapping nodes of identity (i.e., race, class, and gender) rather than focus on any one node alone. Wood (1994) reminds us that notions of femininity and masculinity, constructed differently across lines of race, class, nation, inform the communication process. Cultural feminists such as Johnson (1989) argue that women are culturally different from men and that "woman's culture" should be treated as analytically distinct from that of men.

Contemporary, In this decade, we are seeing more scholars focusing on intracultural communication patterns (Hecht, M. L., Larkey, L., Johnson, J., & Reinard, J. C., 1992). This work allows us to understand communication patterns within groups in their own terms without the distraction of comparisons with dominant group patterns. However, much of this research remains limited to cultural groups within the United States. There are also studies on intercultural communication in groups as diverse as the Yoruba of Nigeria (Asante. 1990), Greeks (Broome, 1990), Mexicans and Mexican Americans (Gonzalez, 1990), the North Yemini (Frye, 1990), Chinese and Americans (Ma, 1990), and Japanese (DiMare, 1990). Interestingly, these research efforts do not "qualify" as intercultural communication scholarship under the discursive rules laid out in Leeds-Hurwitz (1990).

As discussed earlier, the late 1980s and early 1990s also exhibit a turn to the intracultural in terms of domestic cultures within the state (e.g., Hecht, Ribeau, & Alberts, 1989). These efforts alone, however, are insufficient to explain about the contested and power-infused nature of "culture" within intercultural communication

Table 1

Milestones in the discipline of Intercultural Communication

Era	Scholars	Focus on Culture	Synonymous with
1940-1970s	Edward T Hall, , Righter 1979, Daniel 1970. Whiting 1971 Philipsen 1975, Cheseboro 1973	Culture in a pragmatic, goal-oriented manner	Race, social class, gender identity
1980s	Gudykunst and the Positivists	As objectivist approach, and insight into intracultural pattern	Culture as nation state, comparison of cultures microanalysis
Mid and late 1980s	Feminist perspective such as Marsha Houston and Patricia Hill Collins	Culture as nationality and other social construction such as gender.	Various group treated as homogenous
1990s	Leeds Hurwitz Shuter	Intracultural communication theory	

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Based on table 1 we can understand that the research on intercultural communication is an ongoing process, with different approaches and paradigms. The earlier scholars in 1950s had started perceive culture in a more pragmatic manner and to see the relation between communication process and various cultures. In 80s, with the rise of objectivist approach, more thou rough work had been done on intercultural communication and the intracultural pattern. Later on, the Feminist perspective has discussed the issues of culture with more critical explanation. This advancement has affected contemporary and traditional scholars of intercultural communication to discuss the issue in a more dynamic way.

One of the important literatures related to the critical explanation of intercultural communication found in the essay written by Andrew A. Moemeka's, on *Communalism as a Fundamental Dimension of Culture*, appeared on Journal of Communication (Autumn 1998). Moemeka initially, argues that the continuum of individualism-collectivism used to represent the fundamental issue in human society is incorrect. According to him the extreme right of the continuum is not collectivism, but communalism.

Communalism is the principle or system of social order in which, among other things, the supremacy of the community is culturally and socially entrenched, society is hierarchically ordered, life is sacrosanct, and religion is a way of life (Moemeka p. 124). People in a communalistic community are born into the community and not selected into it. In communalistic cultures, communicative acts are engaged in to conform and promote social order. The community itself also normatively determines communication rules and rationale.

Communication is relatively open and usually occurs among people in the same age or belongs to the same ethnic group. In the socialization process, the elders were found to communicate more verbally than the youngsters. This is due to cultural norms that put more prerogatives to the elders to voice their opinion due to their wide experiences and knowledge. The communication is also carried out in small groups such as family meeting or large groups such as neighborhood meeting. The communalist is also found to openly and directly compliment strangers and people not related to them. Other than verbal and non-verbal way of communication, musical instrument like gong and flute play an important role in a communalistic community.

Moemeka (1998), also finally stress that in a modern setting, the authentic cultural social orders, individualism and communalism are now rare. The communication pattern has changed due to a mixture of cultural dimensions seems to be prevalent today. This cultural change is a result of the practice of representative democracy as political system in many countries with communalistic community. People in communalistic community formed a collectivity and create governing authorities. The aim of this establishment is to safeguard the interest of communities and not individuals. In this situation, both individualism and communalism have fallen prey to the diluting powers of collectivism. As a result of this change in the communalistic community, purposes and pattern of communication is also altered.

Communalism and Intercultural Communication in Malaysia:

Taking Moemeka's (1998) argument that communalistic collectivism is a situation where a dualistic cultural orientation occurred and in which communalism and collectivism co-exist. He also argues that these dual interaction or communication pattern can be divided into 'creative coordination pattern' and 'standardized coordination pattern':

Creative coordination pattern

Communalism →   → Personalism

Standardized coordination pattern
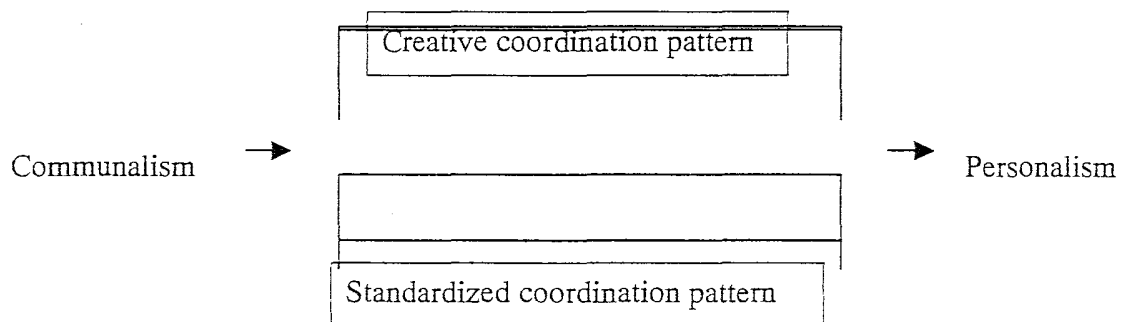
Looking at the present dynamics of communal relations in multi-racial Malaysia, some features can be discerned about communication pattern in Malaysia, especially in the 1990s.   There are two types of communication as discussed by Moemeka (1998):

Creative coordination pattern

The creative coordination for the government or a collective form, exist between society and the government. The society communicates with the government with various channels such as through a political party, interest group or NGOs, or direct representation in the parliament. This creative coordination, as argued by Moemeka (1998), has also created an arena for seriously questioning the fundamental principles and values of communalism. The criticisms take a form of ethnic interest vis-à-vis government policy, distribution of power and economic resources among the ethnic communities.

To face challenges and criticisms on those principles and values, two main factors contributed towards sustaining communalism. Firstly, the political system in which the communication flows. This has occurs in the framework of representative democracy. The country started to practice representative democracy especially, after the end of British Colonialism. According to Lijphart, Malaysia practiced a political system known as Consociational Democracy, a type of democracy, which may serve political stability because it distribute efficiently political and economic resources to multi-ethnic community. Therefore, political power can be distributed among the group of people from different ethnics. This is done through representativeness in a communalistic type of political parties, which then form coalition and cooperation.

The idea of consociational and cooperation among ethnic group is argued to be successful by various scholars (Mauzy 1983; Means 1991; Horowitz 1989 Jayum 1994 dan Nizamudin 1999).

Secondly, In line with this consociationalism is the government effort to create the nation-state community or "Bangsa Malaysia". It is a process to consolidate various ethnic groups into standard, patriotic emotional feeling and culture. However, the idea has faced various criticisms [iii].

Analysis

With contrast to the first communication pattern, standardized coordination behavior pattern seem to preserve the principles and values of communalism. This pattern can be seen on the day-to-day living. As a multi-racial country Malaysia is rich with various cultural heritages. Much of its cultural heritages are recorded in various formats - manuscripts, artifacts, sculptures, traditional motif, etc. There are also traditional songs and music, poems and rhymes, legends, and oral traditions, which are handed down from generation to generation. Here, as the role of culture is to enrich national identity and strengthen cultural understanding among the ethnic groups, it also has contributed to struggles to preserve one own identity and culture. The intercultural communication in this pattern is more colored by primordial sentiment [iv], pride and prejudice.

On a daily interaction, Malaysian always regards racial and ethnic issues as sensitive. Therefore the pattern of standardize communication is influenced by communalistic values and interest. On the surface, especially, in the official media, Malaysia is regarded a harmonious country characterized by three diverse ethnic groups, each with its own religious and cultural traditions. The media such as RTM (Radio Television Malaysia) regularly broadcasts cheerful children from all three races, usually wearing their own traditional dress, singing the national anthem, Negaraku (My Country), or another similarly patriotic song.

However, behind this thin picture of harmony, the intercultural communication is in a passive mode due to ethnic tension, started from the racial conflict of 13 May 1969.

The promotion of inter-ethnic harmony then remains a top priority of the federal government. At the same time, government and private efforts are fostering an increase in cross-cultural contacts. For example, mutual sponsorship of Chinese and Malaysian cultural events by businesses of the two communities is on the rise. Despite, efforts by government and public sector, the expression of Chinese identity and culture appears to be rising in the region, including in Malaysia where the Chinese, due to their sheer numbers, had been the least assimilated. In fact, Chinese-led economic growth has led to enhance ethnic pride and assertiveness among the Chinese population in the region as a whole. The distinctness of cultural values can be extracted from Mahathir (97, who says:

The Malay claim to being discriminated against in Malaysia is based not on laws but on the character and behavior of the major racial groups in Malaysia. The Malays are spiritually inclined, tolerant and easy-going. The non-Malays and especially the Chinese are materialistic, aggressive and have an appetite for work.

While on one hand, the creative coordination pattern of communication has led to strains on sociocultural relationship between the urban and rural people; on the other hand, the standardized coordination pattern is a catalyst to decreasing communalistic values. Related to the first pattern, we see among the rural settlers (especially the younger generation) has started to criticize and challenge the principle of communalism.

The decreasing communalistic values in urban and rural areas have paved a way for more personalism (selfish individualism). The main factor that is actually changing the mind setting and behavior of these people is related with the rapid change in the process of communication within the rural area and between the rural and the urban. This change has created a "cultural shock" to some of the urban and rural community.

To understand how changes in communication may lead to this phenomenon, we can take Hall (1990) explanation on culture differences and communication. One of the important elements about cultural differences is the *context*, which intercultural communication occurs:[v] Context can be categorized into: High and low context refers to the amount of information that a person can comfortably manage. This can vary from a high context culture where background information is implicit to low context culture where much of the background information must be made explicit in an interaction. People from a high context cultures often send more information implicitly, have a wider "network," and thus tend to stay well informed on many subjects. People from low context cultures usually verbalize much more background information, and tend not to be well informed on subjects outside of their own interests.

Therefore, we can argue that the communication pattern in Malaysian is happening in an increasing 'high context', which is characterized by high amount of communication received by the people and wider network. Various government efforts on communication and media especially in the 1990s created this new context. One of the important elements is the creation of Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC)[vi]. It is a world-first, world-class act - of technology to accelerate Malaysia's entry into the Information Age, and through it, help actualize Vision 2020. The MSC will bring together, for the first time ever, an integrated environment with all the unique elements and attributes necessary to create the perfect global multimedia climate. Multimedia is primarily about communication, not technology: The term does not necessarily refer to a computer-based presentation but to a media mix: text, buttons, bitmap images, photos, animation sequences, video, and sound.

Multimedia is also actually referred to hypermedia.[vii] In many fields of application, such as intercultural communication, it is possible to create real-world problems to be solved and practiced with a computer program based on hypermedia. Since multimedia and computers as well as the internet has been widely used by most Malaysian in the urban areas, government sectors, universities and schools as well as some of the rural areas, the intensity of information and the widespread of news and culture is nowadays far reaching.

As a side effect of this communication 'blow', the government has to find mechanism to safeguard the communalistic values as well as to find ways to enhance intercultural communication among various ethnic groups in Malaysia. One way to do it is through the implementation of communication and cultural policy. Malaysia has made several attempts to create the guideline basis of intercultural communication policy. At the earlier stage, communication expert such as James Halloran from Britain and Cees Hamelink from Holland came to advise the government on the communication policy. Nowadays, the responsibility to formulate communication policy is under the Ministry of Information.

The communication policy is something crucial and difficult to be formulated as intercultural communication is concerned. In one case in 1995 for example, the airing of a hit Taiwanese television series, Judge Pao, has created a controversy in Malaysia. Under rules following the 1969 riots, Chinese costumed dramas were banned from Malaysian television. However, Metrovision, the television station that bought the TV. Series, believes that competitors drew upon the obscure law to stop the showing of the very popular series. Following protests by the DAP and the MCA, the Information Ministry agreed that the show could be aired (Economist, 10/21/95).

he government is also concerned with the effect of some printed media such as newspapers on the population. Currently there are about 10 major newspapers that are being consistently circulated to the general public[viii]. On a substantial basis, most of these newspapers are actually controlled by the government under the Printing Act and Internal Security Act. The Malaysian National News Agency (BERNAMA), was set up by the Act or Parliament in 1967, is responsible for distributing news materials on any matter of public and national interest within and outside Malaysia.

The broadcasting in Malaysia is still largely dependent on imported material, particularly those from the West. To upgrade the local broadcasting industry, the government has given import duty exemption for broadcasting equipment to local broadcasting companies. The Department of Broadcasting Malaysia of the Ministry of Information provides broadcasting services and disseminates information over radio and television in order to upgrade the socio-economic development of the Malaysia society in keeping with national aspiration.

The other government policy is related to culture. National Cultural Policy was established to promote greater emphasis on cultural programmes that enhance national identity, promote national integration and unity as well as maintain racial harmony. The base national culture is the Malay culture, however other cultures of different ethnic groups practice their own unique cultures. To enrich culture of Malaysia in 1996, the government has allocated a sum of RM73.71 million for the enrichment and promotion of culture and arts in Malaysia.

The Malaysian Government Expenditure on culture as a percentage of total expenditure can be seen in the following table:

Year	Total government Expenditure in RM	Expenditure on culture In RM	Share (%)
1980	20,724,348,256	47,732,806	0.23
1985	29,191,096,194	58,860,149	0.20
1990	33,405,637,300	137,284,450	0.41
1995	48,797,932,300	554,721,130	1.14
1996	55,467,290,400	316,329,000	0.57

Source: Malaysia. Belanjawan Persekutuan. Anggaran hasil dan perbelanjaan bagi tahun 1980, 1985, 1990, 1995. Kuala Lumpur: Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Bhd, 1980

The second initiative on culture is done through government institutions. Research in the field of culture are being undertaken by respective universities especially the University Malaya, University Kebangsaan Malaysia, University Science of Malaysia and MARA Institute of Technology. Research publications/documents on various aspects of Malaysian culture are being produced as a result of such research activities.

Strategy for Good Governance

Based on the discussion above, we can suggest a few criteria as imperatives for the development policy:

1. Government should be more participative and built an image of 'friendly government, to manage the complexity and dynamic of interculturalism.

2. As globalization brought sophistication and state-of-the art media of communication, government must realize and take necessary steps to interact and prepare with change in the way people look at government. Internet for example may be; in one way beneficial to both parties but in other way, may mischief people as the may distorted with ideas and culture developed by Internet.

3. Government cultural policy must always emphasize communalism. Although globalization may leads to de-communalization, but in certain area ethnicity and community persist.

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Non-governmental organizations play significant role in shaping public perception and mould certain culture. Good governance must always flexible and open in one hand but in the other hand keep and eyes to various NGOs that may deteriorate national culture.

Conclusion

Both creative and standardized communication pattern seem to pave a way to decreasing communalistic values in Malaysia. This trend is argued to be a result of rapid communication change in Malaysia especially in the 1990s. Various types of communication whether it is classified, legal or illegal are disseminated in the society through various channels, especially the Internet.

The Internet itself had been regarded as important factors, which change people's attitude and culture. However, the most significant factors of this technological advancement are its capability to create a society, which is more critical towards the government. In 1999 Malaysian General Election for instance, the Internet had played important role to highlight various political news especially with regard to Anwar Ibrahim's case. This has led to certain extent, political consciousness among the younger generation.

As intercultural communication is concern, various efforts have been done by the government to tackle the ongoing conflict on communication flow between various cultures and sub-cultures in the country. Government investment on MSC and other communication projects have also created more high-context type of communication within the urban and rural populations. The negative side effects can be traced on the existence of more personalism symptoms such as unfriendly, selfish and individualistic culture. With simple diagnosis, this system can be seen on both urban and rural area. However, it is more serious in urban area. In the rural area, communalistic values and cultures such as friendliness is decreasing. Twenty years back, a young man from one 'kampung', perhaps could recognize the elders and other people in his community such as who are the 'ketua kampung' (head of village), 'Pak Imam' and 'Pak Bilal' (the religious person) or even, the the 'dukun'(village medicine man'. But today, ask the young man who is 'Pak Haji Syukor' who leave near to 'Pak Ahmad's house, he will never get the right answer. The same thing happen vis-à-vis ethnicity. Previously, a Chinese family may live in a Malay village and mingled with the villager with such a good and eloquent 'bahasa Melayu', but nowadays, this situation does no longer exist.

The Internet has become a media where people from different cultures in Malaysia can express their feeling and opinion freely, on-line. The Chinese for example, will be more sentimental towards their fate, culture and tradition. This will also lead towards more personalism and romanticism, in a sense that they will only care and committed about their own circle and the communication across culture will be declining.

In light of above understanding, we conclude that the task of creating good governance is not only on the shoulder of stakeholders but also involves other non-governmental organization.

[i] For instance, Dubner (1972) examines nonverbal aspects of Black English. Daniel and Smitherman (1976) explicate the Traditional African Worldview and argue for its significance in understanding African American communication. Sh..ter (1979) investigates the use of the "dap" in the military--a handshake used by African American soldiers to express solidarity.

[ii] i.e., communicative phenomena such as uncertainty reduction (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1989).

[iii] For example, The once Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Mohamed Nazri Abdul Aziz asserts that the creation of a "Bangsa Malaysia" should not be legislated. He says that such actions would force all Malaysians to abandon their racial and cultural identities. He believes that a "Bangsa Malaysia" will evolve naturally through the voluntary efforts of all citizens (New Straits Times, 11/20/95).

[iv] Primordial sentiment is a feeling that very much related to one's own culture and ethnicity.

[v] Three important concepts about cultural differences that Hall described include: time, context, and space,. For a more in depth discussion of High/Low context. please refer to "Beyond Culture" by Hall

[vi] It is a length of greenfield "corridor". 15 kilometres wide and 50 kilometres long, that starts from the Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC), itself an intelligent precinct, which houses the world's tallest buildings - down south to the site of the region's largest international airport, the Kuala Lumpur

vii Hypermedia refers to computer-based materials linked by non-linear structures of information (Woodhead 1991: 205). It is to make data management easier and more natural, making use of association, a characteristic of human thinking (Koski & Oesch 1993: 24; Paananen & Lallukka 1994: 12; 52).

viii In 1996, the Ministry of Information records that there are approximately 5,586,000 daily newspaper readers, approximately 6,456 weekly newspaper readers, approximately 3,177,000 fortnightly magazine readers, and approximately 2,469,000 monthly magazine readers in Malaysia